

# Review Trafomatic Audio Rhapsody PSE 300B integrated tube amplifier: classic virtues in a modern package

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While solid state technology keeps conjuring up one novelty after another and tubes are increasingly labeled as a forgotten technology from days long gone, reality fortunately turns out to be more nuanced. I use the term fortunately quite deliberately because as far as I am concerned vacuum tubes are still superior to their transistor brethren in many aspects of music reproduction. There. I said it. | [Voor Nederlands, klik hier](#)



Since the beginning of this year, the Trafomatic Audio Rhapsody PSE 300B integrated tube amplifier has been one of the new stars of this ever glowing firmament. That name is quite a mouthful for an amplifier that merges old virtues with new technology under its robust and even flamboyant exterior. Earlier this year, at the aptly named Rhapsody villa on the Borneolaan in Hilversum, the public was invited to get acquainted with this dazzling beauty, executed in 'Sunset Orange' metallic paint.

## Trafomatic Rhapsody PSE 300B

As in real life, you can also experience love at first sight with audio products. When I took a closer look at the Rhapsody PSE 300B amplifier, I experienced this tantalizing sensation because of its singularly exciting combination of old and new design elements. At the presentation in Hilversum my attention was initially drawn to the extraordinarily beautiful and sharply styled Franco Serblin Ktêma loudspeakers, but the very next moment my attention was caught by this stunning tube amplifier.

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Why? Because it was instantly obvious that I was looking at something really special. Just look at the daring and, in my opinion, delightfully quirky choice of color, not to mention that it's an integrated amplifier equipped with a double compliment of 300B power tubes. Add top quality in-house manufactured power and output transformers, and switching between two different types of 300Bs to its wonderfully enticing and contemporary chassis and what you have is a tube dream come true.

## A Mystery Revealed

The full name on the front of the amplifier reads Rhapsody M2-15 Anniversary stereo PSE 300B tube amplifier. Because 'Anniversary' obviously stands for a certain anniversary, I am curious which anniversary we are talking about here. Marco de Wilde, who has been the driving force behind his distributorship Music2, cleared that up for me. *"Trafomatic chief designer and owner Sasa Cokic and I have been good friends for a long time and help each other when necessary. The Munich High End held in May this year is a great example. As befits a keen music lover, I am always juggling ideas that could potentially be fun and interesting for music lovers."*

*"Since I am a big tube enthusiast like you, I met Sasa in Munich and asked him if he could make a real high-end integrated 300B amplifier with a double power tube configuration for me one day. A gifted designer like him often has certain design ideas in mind too, so things added up remarkably quickly and he agreed to my request. However, I did not think that a product name like M2-15 was particularly inspiring. It did not match the beautiful image I had in mind for the amplifier at all. But what would it have to be then? Suddenly the name Rhapsody came to mind. It is a beautiful heroic name that stands for an epic poem and it is a regularly used description for certain (classical) pieces of music. But I had yet another meaning in mind, that had to do with a much-deserved tribute to the Dutch high-end hifi store called Rhapsody."*

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## Really new?

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The brand name Trafomatic is gaining international momentum in the field of top-quality tube amplifier designs and as the name already implies, the brand's own (output) transformers are the main reason for its fame. This new amplifier is the third model in their current lineup that is based on 300B power tubes, but Marco is especially proud of the fact that the Rhapsody is Trafomatic's very first parallel single-ended integrated 300B amplifier. In the previous paragraph, I mentioned that top designers always have certain design ideas in mind, but not all of them can be implemented immediately, and sometimes they are not viable at all. In the case of the Rhapsody, it was a meticulous combination of existing and new ideas. But there was another important reason to choose this well-loved type of power tube. Marco noticeably sits up straighter in his chair and continues his explanation with even more enthusiasm.

*"You already know this from me Werner, but I love playing with 300B amplifiers because the product range at Music2 mainly consists of high-efficiency horn loudspeakers. This type of loudspeaker only needs a few watts to create a grand and lifelike sound in all its expressiveness. So basically the 2 x 20 watts of the Rhapsody are almost too much for this type of loudspeaker. But to make the unique qualities of this design available to a larger group of people, we decided to make it more of a universal model."*

## Made for eternity

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Anyone who lays eyes on the Rhapsody amp for the first time will be struck by the beautifully styled shape of the cabinet. A cabinet that for once does not have the usual sharp and rectangular shapes that characterise almost all other tube amplifiers. So its round shapes must have been milled from a block of aluminum? No, because just like the other Trafomatic models, the Rhapsody has a cabinet made from Panzerholz. Panzerholz? Is that suitable for heavy amplifiers? Yes, it is, because the very fine structure of this extremely heavy, super-compressed impregnated plywood makes it possible to sculpt it into any desired shape using a 5-axis CNC machine.





Another advantage that should not be underestimated is that the heavy and solid wooden outer shell is very effective in damping resonances. Still, it's not just wood we are talking about. Due to safety requirements, metal panels had to be installed on the inside to provide the necessary electrical shielding. Because of their additional (output) transformers tube amplifiers are almost always larger and heavier than their solid-state counterparts, but the Rhapsody does not appear to be excessively large.

At 47 centimeters, its width is only a few centimeters larger than the 'unwritten rule' of 43 centimeters, and its depth of 40 centimeters is entirely common. However, its height of 27 centimeters is quite substantial but necessary to accommodate the tubes and the large transformers. Finally, the weight of 32 kilograms calls for a sturdy piece of furniture or rack with room to breathe because the tubes dissipate quite a lot of heat.

## Symmetrical construction

By this I don't necessarily mean the actual circuitry but rather the beautifully balanced visual appearance. I prefer "mirrored" devices anyway, and this Trafomatic lives up to that flawlessly in all respects. While there's a round on/off switch on the left side, the rest of the appearance is robust, warm, evocative and 'clean' at the same time.

The robustness is brought by two widely spaced large black rotary controls. One for volume and the other for source selection. Two beautiful and sizeable analog VU meters round out the frontal view. On the handsome black classic top panel, you will find four 300B power tubes and two 6SN7 driver tubes and also a rotary control that allows you to quickly and easily adjust the sensitivity of the VU meters.



## 'Mesh' or 'solid'

There is, however, one more special option found in this amplifier that few competitors have. I am talking about the switch that allows toggling between 'Mesh' and 'Solid'. As aficionados and especially older audiophiles probably know, the history of this type of tube started back in 1938(!) with the famous Western Electric 300B. A true mesh grid tube is rare and the reason why so many models are still on offer is because most of these newly produced 300B power tubes are not true mesh grid designs. That is because true Mesh Grid anodes are extremely laborious and consist of wires that are woven in a specific way, giving a true 300B its typical characteristics of open, detailed, and rich or saturated sound.

In the 'Mesh' setting, this switch drops the anode dissipation to 22 watts. This is the ideal setting for this type of tube. The 'Solid' setting increases the dissipation to 28 watts, which is suitable for 'normal' 300B tubes. It is especially interesting when you compare a Mesh tube to a Solid model. The difference between those is that the former not only tends to sound beautifully tight and well-defined but that the woven mesh wires also create a wonderfully organic, euphonic, and relaxed sound. A sound that, with a really good(!) amplifier, does not come across as veiled in any way. In direct comparison, solid plate tubes sound flatter, and less refined and they lack feeling and organic integration. The beauty of the Rhapsody is that by connecting the power tubes in parallel, it produces a very usable output of 2 x 20 watts. That doesn't seem like much by today's standards, but for a 300B integrated amplifier, it's huge. Best of all, this greatly expands the number of possible applications and the unique 300B magic can also be enjoyed with normal loudspeakers that have slightly higher efficiency.

## Maximum sound quality

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Although you are not required to do any settings as a user, Trafomatic, unlike several other brands, still maintains a fixed bias setting for the power tubes in all of its models. The reason is quite simple and has to do with the fact that auto bias solutions not only correct when there is no music signal, but also when there is one. This creates an audible loss of quality that can manifest as, for example, a reduction of dynamic contrast. What is also striking about this entire amplifier concept is that everything is so pleasantly straightforward and uncomplicated.



So no built-in DAC module or phono stage, just top-of-the-line chassis mounts for three analog (RCA) inputs and one balanced pair (XLR). The loudspeaker terminals are WBT's great sounding nextgen™'s, offering a 4 Ohms and an 8 Ohms tap. The sophisticated overall package is completed with a simple (volume up and down only), but tastefully designed and well-built remote control that matches the amplifier's materials and color scheme.

## Listening at Rhapsody

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As one would expect from a high-end specialist like Rhapsody in Hilversum, they had set up a beautiful pair of loudspeakers for this demo. At first, however, I was a bit apprehensive. Most top loudspeakers on the market are not easy to drive and certainly not by a 2 x 20 watt 300B tube amplifier. Fortunately, Harry and Michael know what they are doing and they had chosen a pair of very nice Franco Serblin Ktêma loudspeakers.



As far as I am concerned, this is yet another product that represents Italian grace and the use of materials in its finest form. But what made most sense, in this case, was their 92 dB efficiency and a minimum recommended amplifier power of 20 watts. That should be a perfect match. Well...yes and no, for these Italians also have a fairly low impedance of 4 Ohms that dips to 3.2 Ohms right at a power-hungry 70 Hz!

Fortunately, though, the Rhapsody store team did a good job pre-calculating everything, and an unexpectedly natural sound emerged at the very first sound. This was not just beautiful, it was breathtakingly natural and above all stripped of all hi-fi artefacts. Even the very tricky lowest frequencies went deep and were remarkably well-controlled at the same time. The 2 x 20 watt amplifier delivered an infectious amount of drive, expression and joy into the room, which very quickly put a big smile on the listener's faces.



## Restrained euphoria

And yet, one person appeared to be a little less euphoric during the demo, and this time it was not one of the listeners but Harry van Dalen himself! Suddenly, out of the blue, he said *"I guess you guys haven't noticed, but to me, this demo is like riding a rodeo most of the time"*.

A rodeo ride? *"Yes, because what you guys may not have noticed is that I was adjusting the volume all the time. When the music was soft I could turn up the volume, but when I knew that a loud dynamic peak was coming, I quickly turned it down. The main reason is that the room is now filled with visitors and that dampens the room a bit. Combined*

*with the room dimensions and the loudspeakers that turned out a little less easy to drive than I had anticipated, it took more power than when I was listening alone. I don't think anybody noticed that because of the high quality of this amplifier."*

## **Personal experiences**

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After this interesting and informative session - that turned out a lot more positive than it might appear - I carefully loaded the cooled-down PSE 300B into the back of my car. Hmm, will this 20 watts per channel be too limited after all, within my "normal" setting, or will it not be so bad after all? Just as I parked my car on my driveway at home, I received a "rowdy" video from distributor Marco de Wilde. No, there were no unspeakable scenes, it was about his own Rhapsody PSE 300B.

As the video progressed it turned out that the amp was playing dynamically and effortlessly in his listening room. How was that possible? Well, with high-efficiency horn loudspeakers that are easy to drive. With a smile on his face and a dB meter in his hand, Marco showed me that he easily reached undistorted peaks of 106 dB and yes, with the same 2 x 20 watts output power.

## **Listening at home**

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As I had hoped, it was apparent from the very first moment that this single-ended tube amplifier felt much more comfortable in my home situation with my relatively easy-to-drive Master Contemporary C speakers than with the considerably more power-hungry Ktêma loudspeakers. Yes, this was exactly what you want to experience with a tube beauty like this. Passion, drive, naturalness, tonal colors, and that certain magic that is hard to describe. In other words, the coherence between the notes occurred quite naturally.



Also immediately noticeable was Trafomatic's very own and instantly recognizable signature sound. And that means a level-headed reproduction of sound without exaggeration, smooth, even-handed, and without a dark or too light - or even thin-sounding character. What was even more striking, however, was the unmistakable "magic" signature of single-ended amplification.

Basically, push-pull designs are somewhat tighter in the low end, they are more neutral and have a 'clean' character with greater output power. In contrast, single-ended triode designs often exhibit an even smoother, more melodic and more colorful character and they have even more of that typical tube magic because of the inherent pureness of the basic circuitry.

## Unique symbiosis

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What made the Rhapsody PSE 300B amplifier so special and unique was that its sound appeared to merge the best of both worlds. No, it will never be able to fully achieve the power and punch of push-pull designs, but it gave more than a good approximation of that. Let us just zoom in on the bass, which came across as tighter, more powerful, and better defined than I could remember from any other single-ended design. There was more insight, conciseness and self-evidence than with other 300Bs known to me.

Most intriguing of all, however, was that this amplifier has managed to retain its true 300B virtues. The saturated timbres that are typical to tube amplification, combined with a wonderful engagement and transparency were immediately audible, much like the property that technology never got in the way of the music.



As for the stereo image, the amplifier took the middle ground. It did not exaggerate anything and mainly transferred the characteristics of the music I played. The music has a very attractive "breathing" character combined with beautifully natural 3D layering. In short, an impressively beautiful all-round tube amplifier that works remarkably well with conventional loudspeakers but it shifts into sixth gear when you pair it with easy-to-drive loudspeakers such as horns.



## Conclusion

This design – despite its seemingly "antique" circuitry – just oozes 2022, but unfortunately, the Trafomatic Audio Rhapsody PSE 300B is limited to only 15 copies. And that is a bit of a shame because this is a rare design that delivers the virtues of 300B amplification in a more powerful and especially more universally applicable way. The one thing that could still throw a spanner in the works is the hefty price tag of over €18,000. In itself that does not have to be a big deal for the wealthier music lover, but it becomes a lot more difficult when it turns out that you only get 2 x 20 watts of output power for that amount of money. But ultimately, the way the amplifier handles this limited wattage is what impresses most.

The fact that it also allows very easy switching between mesh and solid tubes makes the device even more irresistible to aficionados. So if you want to be seduced by a beautiful 300B amplifier that is truly able to do justice to all the virtues of this legendary power tube but in a more powerful package, than here is your chance. But don't hesitate, because with this amplifier 'out of stock' really means out of stock.

**Trafomatic Rhapsody PSE 300B**

18,499 euro | [www.music2.nl](http://www.music2.nl)